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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 001035

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AF/S FOR MOZENA, CECSARINI, GALANEK  
AF/PD FOR RILEY SEVER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/04/2014

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SUBJECT: MUTHARIKA CREATES NEW WEEKLY TO COUNTER PRO-MULUZI MEDIA

REF: LILONGWE 1018

Classified By: DCM DAVID GILMOUR FOR REASONS 1.5 (b/d).

1. (C) SUMMARY. A new newspaper, Democratus, has begun circulation in Malawi amid a growing fragmentation of the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF). President Mutharika and his closest advisors are reportedly providing financial support and other resources for the new weekly. In the wake of a public disagreement on fundamental political issues between Mutharika and former president Muluzi, Democratus will apparently offer the Mutharika camp's version of the news. END SUMMARY.

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More Political News for Malawi's Readers  
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2. (C) A new Malawian national weekly, Democratus, arrived at newsstands October 30 under the banner "Growing With Democratic Values." Although required under Malawian media rules, the paper contained no statement of ownership, however mission contacts believe the paper is being financed by President Mutharika and senior political advisors. The paper has already hired some of Malawi's leading print journalists, including Dennis Mzembe, former chief reporter for national daily the Nation (circulation 20,000), who assumed the role of editor-in-chief. Public Affairs contacts report that salaries and perks for Democratus' staff are the highest in the country.

3. (C) The news coverage in the first edition was plainly pro-Mutharika, and supported his anti-corruption efforts against senior UDF officials affiliated with former president Bakili Muluzi. In its maiden editorial comment, Democratus pledged to be a public watchdog that would provide accurate and balanced information: "We commit ourselves to the ideals of fair play and professional journalism." The most powerful statement of the first edition, however, came from the 16 full pages of advertisements (worth over \$6,000 USD) from the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF). MASAF is a large-scale poverty alleviation and infrastructure project funded by the World Bank. The chairman is appointed directly by the President.

4. (C) Media insiders have asserted that President Mutharika was advised to create a media organ to counter the strong pro-Muluzi bias in many papers. These continue to characterize Mutharika's anti-corruption efforts as political "persecutions" rather than legitimate prosecutions of corruption cases. Democratus' lavish funding and government-generated advertising revenue are already producing a backlash among other media houses.

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Muluzi Falls Silent in the Media  
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5. (C) For several months, President Mutharika has maintained an acrimonious and public dispute with the Muluzi-dominated UDF about the supremacy of a sitting government over the party that put it in power. Muluzi had insisted that the UDF, of which he is president, was "above" the government. In recent weeks, however, Muluzi has fallen silent. Despite a series of scathing attacks by leading Malawian clergy on corruption in his government, and the recent arrests of several high-profile corruption defendants (reftel), Muluzi has surprised local observers by not defending himself and his political cronies in the media.

6. (C) COMMENT. Overall the print media is equally critical of Mutharika and Muluzi, but clearly Mutharika has felt it necessary to try to level the media playing field with his predecessor by establishing this newspaper. At the same time, Mutharika is softening his tone toward the UDF, in order to strengthen his base in the party. On November 2 Mutharika declared the UDF to be Malawi's ruling party, a significant position shift. It remains to be seen whether Muluzi's sudden silence is a short-term tactical move or a willingness to finally begin to settle into the role of ex-president.

17. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED. Mutharika's new paper will have to exercise some degree of restraint in order to be taken seriously by the wider public: too much government funded advertising may risk the credibility of his efforts to promote fiscal responsibility and transparency. Mutharika's political strategy must simultaneously seek to maintain his fragile base within the UDF while keeping Muluzi, the party president, at arm's length. END COMMENT.

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